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ABSTRACT

Previous models for providing professors of educational administration opportunities to spend a year working as urban school district administrators have a number of problems. Professors must make decisions they will not be around to implement, and they often find it difficult to return to the university. Instead, the professor might be provided an opportunity for professional renewal through becoming a full-time "de facto" member of an urban school district's management team for one term. The professor would thus be given an opportunity to observe school district functioning, interact with school people, and help the district in some area of the professor's expertise. For this program to be successful, the district must provide specific placement; allow access to meetings, schools, and district data; provide introductions and clear explanations of the professor's role; and assign appropriate tasks. The professor, in turn, must be clear about personal renewal goals, abide by local norms, take advantage of opportunities offered, earn acceptance from the management team, and keep restricted information strictly confidential. If all these obligations are met, the professor will return to the campus with keener insights into the complexities of urban school district management, and the practitioners will benefit from the professor's expertise and labor. (Author/JM)

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The Professor In An Urban School District

A Renewal/Service Option

by
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and
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At almost any professional meeting where educational administration practitioners and professors are in attendance, there are formal and informal discussions which make clear the need to develop and test various models for linking school district practitioners and academicians. Such discussions may center on proposals for "new" models.[1]

However, more frequently there are expressions of dissatisfaction with prevailing linkages in which the professor goes to "the field" to perform a specific service — e.g., conduct a study, make a speech, teach an extension course, or the practitioners come to the campus for graduate courses, conferences, workshops and institutes. The lamentations may include such statements as, "The service received from professors is of little value," "Professors lack genuine insight into the problems of managing a modern complex urban school district," "Educational administration courses are not relevant to current concerns in schools systems." Based on this state of affairs and on the belief that both practitioners and professors would find mutually satisfying interactions advantageous, our purpose in this article is to offer a simple renewal/service model for professors. Application of the model may result in satisfying exchange between professors and contemporary school managers and may provide a basis for improved professorial performance within the university classrooms as well as within traditional "field service" settings. →

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Background and Rationale

Within the past 15 years, at least two "new" models for linking local district practitioners and professors for the purpose of professorial renewal and/or service have been advocated and used: a position exchange in which a professor and practitioner "trade" jobs for a period of time, usually a school year and the actual assumption for a set time period of a local school district administrative job by a professor. Even though each of these approaches has been successfully used and provides many benefits, each has some major drawbacks.

The position exchange, the most widely advocated approach, presents a number of problems because of the different cultures of the university and the school system. The professor going to the school district needs to gain acceptance as an authentic manager when his/her tenure is known to be temporary; the practitioner going to the university faces an array of hurdles in gaining institutional approval to teach graduate courses, in serving on graduate school committees, and in directing graduate student research.

A related point is that both are required to assume on-going responsibilities and may make decisions which have an impact long after each returns to the original position. For example, a professor assuming the responsibilities of an assistant superintendent for instruction may set in motion certain curriculum improvement activities which the practitioner must carry through or abort upon returning to the school system. The assistant superintendent serving as professor may approve a thesis proposal which creates an untenable future commitment for the professor.

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The movement of a professor to a local district administrative post and back to the university is becoming increasingly difficult. Not only are there declining enrollments and demands to reduce the number of district administrators but also many administrative positions are being filled by promotion from within and/or that professorial achievements are accorded very little weight when selection decisions are made. Further, unless prior arrangements (e.g., a leave without pay) are made, the professor may find that current retrenchment efforts within many educational administration departments reduce the opportunities for returning to the university. Even if the return to the university is made after one or two years, the professor may have "fallen behind" in regard to the role expectations for the professorship within the institutional culture.

With the problems inherent in the "position exchange" and "actual assumption of an administrative position" approaches, there is a need for a less complex and more broadly applicable means of providing a professor an opportunity for renewal/service.[2] This approach must ensure that (a) the professor can assume a role within the local district which does not disturb existing authority relationships, (b) the professor is relieved from the university-held expectancies for only a relatively short time, (c) the practitioners find some benefit from their interactions with the professor, (d) the professor can successfully perform in the role assigned, (e) and there is "immersion" in the school district culture so as to enhance the professor's understanding of the current problems of managing complex local school systems.

In the opinion of the authors, a useful and fulfilling renewal/service opportunity can be provided by the simple procedure of having a professor become a full-time, *de facto* member of the management team of a school system for a quarter or semester.[3] The professor must be divorced physically and psychologically from pro-

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fessorial activities — teaching, research, writing, committee work and should observe work in a local district for a period of time which is long enough to permit significant learning, but not for so long to hinder one's university-based career. It seems imperative that the professor be full-time and separated from university-related activity. One veteran professor, reporting on his three-fifths time, school year-long, experience as a *de facto* member of the administrative staff of a major urban district noted: "In retrospect, it might be advisable to concentrate whatever time is to be spent in such relationships into a shorter, intensive, full-time assessment."[4]

In the sections that follow, the details of an approach which is consistent with the foregoing rationale are presented.

Obligations of the Host District

Beyond the obvious need for work space and clerical support, the local district should assume four basic obligations to the professor on-site if the time spent is going to be to the maximum advantage of all parties: (a) placement, (b) access, (c) visibility, and (d) appropriate tasks.

The professor on-site will represent a new phenomenon for most members of a district management team; their nearest frame of reference may likely be the administrative intern. With the high probability of a "just-what-do-we-do-with-this-person" climate, it is incumbent on the superintendent to provide the professor upon entry with a specific placement—a home base—within the school district structure. This placement should be negotiated before the professor arrives on-site. There are three considerations involved in an appropriate placement. First, it should take into account the goals of the professor. For example, if one of the professor's primary aims is to become updated in the intracacies of the financial operation of a present-day urbar district, attachment to the immediate staff of the chief financial officer (e.g., comptroller) would seem appropriate. Second, the placement should be such that the professor has considerable freedom and flexibility in terms of access to the organization. As the professor becomes acculturated there will likely be interest created in a variety of activities and events taking place within the district and, within the bounds of reason, the professor should be able to explore these. Third, the benefits to the local school district must be considered. Presumably each professor has some special competencies which can be tapped for the benefit of the district, and the placement should permit the district to take advantage of these. To follow through with the professor whose goals suggest a placement with the comptroller, it may be that this person has had an extensive background in vocational program cost studies and the district's need of some assistance has caused such a proposed study to be placed on "hold." Such a condition would obviously reinforce the proposed placement.

The provision for access is critical because access creates learning opportunities. Ideally, the total school district should be "open." This would include (a) access to meetings such as those of the superintendent's staff, divisional staffs, instructional division, for example, advisory committees, principals, and planning and strategy groups (e.g., collective bargaining strategy team); (b) access to individual schools and administrators; and (c) access to data available in various files and throughout the management information system. Access includes making the professor aware of what is available and making certain the school system personnel understand clearly that information is to be made available for the professor. One simple technique for accomplishing this is for each key administrator to provide the professor with a copy of his/her daily schedule and "red line" any event that is not open. Making provision for the management information system director to orient the professor will enhance awareness of the kinds of →

data available as well as the format of data collection and retrieval.

The superintendent is the key to access for the professor. If the superintendent's meetings, conferences, and other activities are accessible and if the superintendent stresses with management team members that the district is open to the professor, the probabilities are greater that the subordinate administrators will quickly follow suit.

Visibility and access are closely related. The personnel of the school district must know the professor is on-site and why. If the professor becomes recognizable quickly—within the first two weeks on site—appearances at various meetings and requests for information will be accepted routinely. The district superintendent and /or the district administrator with whom the professor is placed must assume the responsibility for ensuring visibility, and relatively simple techniques can be used. These include a feature in the "in house" newspaper or bulletin, an explanatory memo from the superintendent to all district administrators, and an introduction with an explanation of why the professor is present at a school board meeting, a total management session, and so on.

If the school district is to receive any real benefit from the professor's presence, there is a need for substantive tasks to be undertaken and completed. Task performance is also important to the professor in that (a) successful completion of some locally-valued activity will enhance the professor's status and rapport with the practitioners and (b) appropriate tasks generally result in greater immersion into the workings of the district. We believe that the learning which results from observation only will be very limited after the first two or three weeks on-site.

As suggested by the foregoing, an appropriate task is one which brings the professor in contact with the on-going problems and issues of district management, which is consistent with personal goals, and which is achievable. There are definite limits to the kinds of tasks that can be achieved by the professor on-site. For example, tasks which demand that the professor make decisions affecting the work lives of district employees will probably conflict with local norms. Thus, most achievable tasks will be in the categories of problem solution, process improvement study, and/or resource-linkage. For example, the professor can appropriately serve as the staff person for an *ad hoc* committee composed of upper level district managers who are considering various alternatives for solving a major problem about such items as employment procedures, school rezoning, and curriculum revision and similar concerns. The professor may conduct specific studies of local need such as an evaluative study of the performance assessment system for members of the management team.[5] Also, since the professor may have broader contacts within the universities and educational support agencies, assistance might be provided local district personnel in locating needed human resources for a variety of purposes.

Role and Obligations of the Professor On-Site

Obviously the exact role and obligations assumed by the professor on-site will vary with place, personalities, and events. However, there are several basic obligations which must be assumed by the professor if the potential for a successful venture is to be maximized.

First, before arrival on-site the professor must be clear about personal renewal goals. The goal clarification process should begin prior to negotiations with local district personnel for the assignment. Also, these negotiations will serve to sharpen the professor's thinking about goals to be achieved while on-site. If the professor does not achieve goal clarification, district personnel cannot meet their obligation of appropriate placement and tasks.

Second, the professor must learn and observe the norms adhered to by the local district →

management team. The local management team will have evolved relatively clear expectations relating to a variety of matters such as work hours, demeanor at staff meetings, internal protocol, and ways of responding to various types of issues and problems. Even though the professor may not be in agreement with the local norms, if the role assigned is not one of a change agent, the professor can enhance the opportunities for rapport by strict observation of these norms. To offer one simple illustration, if the central office management staff generally observes an "8 to 5" work day and attends all school board meetings, the professor, even though not a district employee, should do the same.

Third, the professor must take advantage of the opportunities made available. If the district personnel have met their obligations concerning access, there will be a wide variety of opportunities for observation and participation. Capitalizing on these opportunities will enable the professor to become more immersed in the local district culture. Conversely, failure to make use of the opportunities offered may result in reduced access to organizational functioning as time goes by.

Fourth, a high priority should be placed on completion of assigned tasks. Previously, it was suggested that there was a need for the professor's time to be at least partially devoted to district-valued tasks and that tasks related to problem solving, process improvement study, and/or resource linking were appropriate. The corollary obligation of the professor is to carry through with the assignments as if he/she were an employee of the district. From the perspective of the district personnel, a major criterion for judging the extent of satisfaction with the interaction will be what the professor produces.

Experience seems to demonstrate the local functionaries will tend to open their day-to-day activities to the professor as an outsider in direct proportion to his/her willingness and capability to involve himself or herself with them in productive work efforts. Participation in an economy of behavioral exchange is the key to maintaining organizational openness. Mere observation, without demonstrable production of some kind by the visitor, will tend to close the access available to the outsider.

Fifth, the professor must be prepared to earn the acceptance and respect of the management team of the school system. As mentioned earlier, in most school districts a professor on-site is a new phenomenon and many district administrators have no experiential base for responding. Even though the superintendent or some other top-level administrator may be active in ensuring the professor's visibility and the placement is appropriate, the professor's role is still marginal. Initially, perceptions of the role may include "intern," "guest," "consultant," "helper," and/or "evaluator." In spite of the perceptual problem, if the professor is sponsored by a respected top-level administrator, like the superintendent, the treatment received from the management staff will, in general, be polite, professional, and reserved. Instant acceptance and respect from battle-hardened urban school administrators based on a person's professorial title is not likely. The professorial achievements may not be highly regarded, and many of the practitioners may not even be familiar with the professor's name or accomplishments. If the professor desires to move the relationships from a more formal and professionally correct level to a less formal and open level, s/he must seize the initiative. Informal contacts like coffee breaks or lunch must be sought, interest and concern must be shown for the perceptions and problems of the individual practitioners with whom contact is made, invitations to meetings and the like should be accepted, offers of assistance to individuals who seem to be seeking it must be made, and suggestions offered must be viewed as credible. Also, as →

stressed before, completion of locally-valued tasks and adherence to norms will contribute to acceptance and respect.

Sixth, what is seen and heard must be treated in confidence. As the school district opens to the professor, knowledge about a wide variety of local issues and about alternative solutions under consideration will increase. Decisions about "who should know what and when they should know it" are decisions for the local staff — not the professor. In such matters as those related to personnel actions, collective bargaining strategy, school rezoning plans, and school site selection, there will likely be a strong desire to temporarily restrict the spread of information.

In sum, even if the professor becomes immersed in the local district culture, wins the acceptance of the practitioners, and is productive by local standards, the status in the local district is temporary. Thus, the professor has the obligation to recognize the "guest" status and behave accordingly.

Financial Support for the Professor On-Site

A very practical consideration, which can create problems in an era of limited funds, is providing the money necessary to support the professor for the quarter or semester spent in the school district. Any arrangement acceptable to the school district leadership, university leadership, and the professor will probably work; however, we believe that a cost-sharing arrangement is desirable. For example, the university could provide a sabbatical or field service assignment enabling a professor to be relieved of campus duties and continue to draw a salary. The school district and the individual professor should share travel, housing, and meal expenses. Specifically, a modest *per diem* allowance or housing could be provided by the district with the professor being personally responsible for travel to and from the site and other costs of daily maintenance. The argument for a cost-sharing plan is based on the premise that since each party will receive benefits, each party should contribute.

Expected Outcomes

If the district leadership and the professor meet their respective obligations, three major outcomes are to be expected.

First, the professor will return to the campus with keener insights into the current complexities of urban school district management. Presumably, these insights will be reflected in the professor's teaching, research, and traditional field service activities. This is not to suggest that veteran professors who have been active in urban districts as consultants or researchers can expect new and startling revelations; rather, the insights will relate to the details and subtleties involved. For example, for most professors who have been away from local district administrative posts for ten or fifteen years or more, there is much to learn about the day-to-day administration of collective bargaining contracts, the intracacies of financial accounting and support systems resulting from new state funding formulas, the requirements placed on local districts by public policy developments such as Public Law 94-142, (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) and the impact of extensive adult and post-secondary vocational programs now burgeoning in the better managed contemporary school districts.

Second, the practitioner can expect to receive benefits from the products of the professor's labor. These products could include plans for improving various aspects of the district operation, evaluative studies, and so on. Additionally, it is likely that the presence of an "outsider" who becomes closely involved in local problems and issues will raise questions and/or offer suggestions which will stimulate consideration of alternatives. This intangible benefit is difficult to identify and measure.

Third, new linkages which can serve to the benefit of the involved parties will be created — that is, district personnel can gain useful "ties" with the university community, including other university-based personnel and programs. Similarly, the professor will identify practitioner contacts which will be of assistance. Further, the professor can serve as a resource person to other professors who are seeking specific linkages with urban district personnel. In brief, the experience will likely lead to a creation or expansion of an IHE-LEA network. □

NOTES

1. For example, the UCEA sponsored university-local school district Partnership Project offered such a proposal.
2. Similarly and obviously, there are needs for establishing and supporting opportunities for practitioners to gain renewal and add to intellectual capital in ways not limited to traditional approaches. However, this present paper reports on and advocates an approach of utility to professors.
3. This opinion is based, in large measure, on a shared experience in which Nunnery spent three and a half months full-time in the 86,000 pupil system where Deck is superintendent. Nunnery served as a *de facto* member of the superintendent's staff during the term of this experience.
4. Daniel S. Sage, "An Experience in University-School System Exchange," *UCEA Review*, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, January, 1977, pp. 18-20.
5. This opinion is based on shared experience also. Nunnery analyzed the assessment system in Orlando by detailed review of the reports generated in the MBO model utilized by the Orange County district for performance evaluation and functional planning. This effort proved to be productive in the eyes of the local administrators and enhanced the quality of the professor's contribution to the school system during the course of his visit.